

Back in 1952, going on 60 years ago, Norman Vincent Peale published the best-selling and iconic book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. It’s virtually impossible to determine the impact this book had on our culture – especially for someone born after 1952, like me, who has never known a world without the idea that positive thinking brings about positive outcomes, a positive life, ultimately a positive world.

Norman Vincent Peale was a Protestant minister – raised Methodist, but eventually becoming part of the Reformed Church of America. Peale grew up in the Midwest – in Ohio – and eventually came out our way, going to Boston University’s School of Theology. Eventually, he took a pulpit in New York City, became a well-known author and preacher, and helped to grow that congregation from 600 members to more than 5000. Positive thinking seemed to work for him, to say the least.¹

Peale undoubtedly had an enormous impact on the cultural landscape of America. Peale wrote things like, “Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy.”² He wrote, “There is a real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment.”³ And the truth is, as easy as it might be to mock Peale as a Pollyanna, there is some basic truth that thinking positively, having some confidence and enthusiasm, really does make things go more smoothly, much of the time. As Barbara Ehrenreich put it in our reading this morning, “... psychologists today agree that positive feelings like gratitude, contentment, and self-confidence can actually lengthen our lives and improve our health.... People who report having positive feelings are more likely to participate in a rich social life, and vice versa, and social connectedness turns out to be an important defense against depression, which is a known risk factor for many physical illnesses. ... on many levels, individual and social, it is *good* to be ‘positive’, certainly better than being withdrawn, aggrieved, or chronically sad.”⁴

And Peale’s ideas, almost 60 years later, haven’t really gone out of style. Do you remember, just a few years ago, in 2006, the phenomenon of the book and DVD called *The Secret*? This secret spoken of was the key to finding success and happiness in life. And it turned out that the secret was the “law of attraction” – the simple idea that like attracts like. The secret is, if you are negative, you attract negative energy to yourself. And the secret is, if you are positive, you attract positive energy to yourself. Both *The Secret* and the “law of attraction” created quite a stir a few years back, though really, it was nothing new. After all, Norman Vincent Peale himself wrote, “If you have zest and enthusiasm you attract zest and enthusiasm. Life does give

¹ Peale had his negative moments, too; for instance, in the Presidential Election of 1960 Peale advised people not to vote for John F. Kennedy because he was a Catholic. Many in the clergy denounced Peale’s anti-Catholicism, but he was perhaps most famously mocked by Adlai Stevenson, who quipped, “As a Christian, I find the Apostle Paul appealing and the Apostle Peale appalling.”

² Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Fireside Press, 2003), p. 1.

³ *Ibid*, quoted in *And I Quote: The Definitive Collection of Quotes, Sayings, and Jokes for the Contemporary Speechmaker*, by Ashton Applewhite, Tripp Evans, and Andrew Frothingham (Thomas Dunne Books, 2003), p. 126.

⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), p. 2.

back in kind.”⁵ So there you have it, in a nutshell. Positive thinking. The secret. And as I said, and as Ehrenreich pointed out, it’s pretty hard to deny that on some basic level, there’s a lot of truth to this “law of attraction” or “positivity”. Laugh, and the world *does* laugh with you, at least up to a point. Smile at someone, and more often than not they’ll smile back. On the other hand, spray out your negativity and anger on someone, and see if they don’t come right back at you with negativity. We know this anecdotally, never mind what scientists and psychologists might say to back it up further. In this, we humans are not so different from the other animals.

Just how far does this positive thinking go back in the American mind? Ehrenreich has some interesting thoughts on this. As you heard in this morning’s reading, we Americans tend to have positivity as part of our self-image and our very ideology. And others in the world have this stereotype of Americans, too. We’re “as corny as Kansas in August”, to quote from Rodgers and Hammerstein. We’re “Yankee doodle dandies”. We have a can-do attitude. And though many around the world roll their eyes at this (and even some of us might roll our eyes at this), it seems to be mixed with at least a little grudging respect for the innovations and successes that there have been in this country.

As Ehrenreich spells out in her book, America’s optimism and sunny thinking has “dark roots”. She explains, “Americans did not invent positive thinking because their geography encouraged them to do so but because they had tried the opposite... the Calvinism brought by white settlers to New England could be described as a system of socially imposed depression.”⁶ A kind of “religious melancholy” (as she puts it) was part of the American landscape from the earliest days.⁷ This bleak Puritanical Calvinism is the disease that made the remedy of positive thinking, or at least a more positive theology, necessary.

And as Ehrenreich describes, the remedy came in the form of the New Thought movement. The New Thought movement was an interesting theological and philosophical combination of “European mystical currents” and eastern mystical traditions, including Hinduism. And, it drew on Transcendentalism and thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson from our own Unitarian heritage. As Ehrenreich puts it, “In the New Thought vision, God was no longer hostile or indifferent; he was a ubiquitous, all-powerful Spirit or Mind, and since [humanity] was really Spirit too, [humanity] was coterminous with God.” Furthermore, she writes, “if everything was Spirit or Mind or God, everything was actually perfect.”⁸ The Unity Church and the Christian Science church ultimately came out of this New Thought movement – Christian Science being one logical outcome of a “mind over matter” worldview.

But I want to pause for a moment, and think about our own tradition, Unitarian Universalism. In addition to Transcendentalism, there are other New Thought elements I see in our UU history. For instance, one common declaration of Unitarianism from the late 19th century until the 1930s was the so-called Unitarian Covenant, which stated, “We believe in: The Fatherhood of God; The Brotherhood of Man; The Leadership of Jesus; Salvation by Character; and The Progress of

⁵ Norman Vincent Peale, quoted in *Be Heard and Be Trusted: How You Can Use Secrets of the Greatest Communicators to Get What You Want* by Tom Marcoux (Marcoux Media, 2009), p. 209.

⁶ Ehrenreich, *ibid*, p. 74.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 79.

Mankind, onward and upward forever.”⁹ Talk about positive thinking! Note that in this covenant not only will humanity progress “onward and upward forever”, but also we are saved by our *character*. It doesn’t get much more positive than that. But let’s not forget our Universalist heritage, which rejected the hellfire and damnation of Calvinism from the start, insisting that God was too good to condemn humans to eternal punishment. Unitarianism and Universalism, our two heritages, were both “positive” traditions from the get-go.

So far, so good. I mean, being positive in one’s religion seems more appealing, to me, than the appalling harshness of Calvinism. But there are pitfalls and downsides. As Ehrenreich points out, these more positive theologies held onto some of the “toxic” elements of Calvinism. Namely, they created a *new* kind of “judgmentalism” and “an insistence,” as she puts it, “on the constant interior labor of self-examination.... To be the positive thinker, emotions remain suspect, and one’s inner life must be subjected to relentless monitoring.”¹⁰ So in both Calvinism and the more positive indigenous American religions, there’s a common insistence that one must work, work, work... While the Calvinist can never let down their guard against sinful thoughts and actions, the religions of positive thinking mean never letting down one’s guard against creeping negativity.¹¹

For all the veneer of positivity, there’s a hidden heart of negativity in positive thinking. Remember that Unitarian covenant I shared earlier, and its “salvation by character”? What’s the flip side of that? It would have to be something like “damnation by character defects”. Perhaps that’s why the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, present day Unitarian Universalist minister in New York City, writes (in the context of diversity and multicultural and anti-racist work), “for people who are blessed with the gift of free religious community, we are also cursed with a nasty little Calvinist streak that we would do well to examine. We would rather be angry and judgmental with one another and ourselves than be tender and merciful, in simple acknowledgement of how hard it continues to be to do what we must do in our congregations”¹²

In addition, this constant self-examination leads to what Ehrenreich calls “self-alienation”. She explains, “A curious self-alienation is required for this kind of effort: there is the self that must be worked on, and another self that does the work”.¹³ It’s almost like you’re spying on yourself and reporting on yourself to yourself. Sounds a little nuts, doesn’t it?

So if that’s positivity for us religious liberals, what about on the more conservative side of the historically Protestant tradition? I won’t go into detail here, but Ehrenreich writes about the “prosperity movement” or the “prosperity gospel” that is popular among many today. One good example of this is Joel Osteen and Houston’s Lakewood Church – perhaps you’ve seen Joel Osteen on television. He’s a very likeable man, I find. I personally believe that he believes what he preaches; that is, I believe he’s ultimately sincere. And what he preaches is very upbeat – positive, you could say – with the main message being that “God wants people to be

⁹ <http://www.americanunitarian.org/AUCChristian.htm>

¹⁰ Ehrenreich, *ibid*, p. 89.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 90.

¹² Rosemary Bray McNatt, response to Paul Rasor’s Berry Street Lecture at UU Ministry Days, June 2009. The entire response may be read at <http://www.uuma.org/BerryStreet/Essays/BSEResponse2009.htm>.

¹³ Ehrenreich, *ibid*, p. 91.

prosperous”.¹⁴ This prosperity gospel is wildly popular today, with mega-churches in the United States much larger than any Unitarian Universalist congregation anywhere.

Osteen seems to be a happy man – he’s certainly prosperous – and I don’t doubt that many of his prosperity gospel followers are helped by his message and a more upbeat outlook on life. Many have criticized the prosperity gospel movement – maybe especially more traditional Christians such as theology professor Michael Horton, who complains that “it makes religion about us instead of about God.”¹⁵ But the problem I have with the prosperity movement is, at the end of the day, the same problem I have with “salvation by character” and the secular “law of attraction”. Namely, it makes everything about our own individual inner lives; it makes everything about us individually and what’s going on in our heads instead of what’s going on with our neighbors and the world. Or as Ehrenreich puts it, “The question is why one should be so inwardly preoccupied at all. Why not reach out to others in love and solidarity or peer into the natural world for some glimmer of understanding?... Why spend so much time working on oneself when there is so much real work to be done?”¹⁶

As an aside, it reminds me of a story of Baba Neem Karoli, better known as Maharaji, the guru to Ram Dass. (Ram Dass is the former Richard Alpert, professor at Harvard, whom I also mentioned last week). The American followers of Maharaji in the 60s and 70s, like Ram Dass, were spiritual seekers who went to India to meet this revered guru; they went seeking enlightenment; they went seeking “the secret” of a more spiritual, less material nature, I suppose. And they will tell stories of how they patiently waited for Maharaji to reveal to them the secrets of the universe, or at least to give them a very special mantra to repeat that would change their lives... and they would wait and wait for him to reveal all to them. But instead, when the American seekers asked Maharaji to reveal the mysterious secret of life, or at least to reveal what they should do, the Maharaji would say to them, “Feed people”. And they’d say, “But Maharaji, what shall I do to obtain enlightenment?” And he would say, “Serve people”. And of course they found this maddening, because they were thinking – as most of us Americans do – in a more inward-way. And he was telling them: be externally-oriented. Feed people. Serve people. Help people. *That’s* the secret, according to Maharaji.¹⁷

It’s a fine line, you see, between positive thinking and magical thinking. And that’s the line I want us to draw. Because honestly, I’m not here today to tell you to be negative! And honestly, I confess, I believe there is real value in being positive – I believe positivity is often an appropriate response to the circumstances we face. But let’s not slip into magical thinking. If things aren’t going your way, whether with your health, your finances, or other aspects of your life, it’s *not* because you aren’t positive enough. Or, put another way, positive thinking *won’t* magically lead to good health and riches. And it’s easy to believe that one’s good fortunes are due to one’s own character or positive thinking, but truly... each of us are put into life circumstances that we did not choose – at birth, and at other points along the way in life’s journey. We like to think that we’re in control, but the truth? Most things – *almost everything* –

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 96.

¹⁷ This story is told in different forms in *Miracle of Love* by Ram Dass (Hanuman Foundation, 1995). Krishna Das also tells a story similar to this frequently at his concerts (as I witnessed in 2006 and 2008 in Northampton, MA).

about the universe is beyond our control – beyond our comprehension, even! We do the best we can with the finite number of things that we can impact through our actions and, yes, our thoughts. But don't beat up on yourself, and don't judge others, for being negative when their circumstances are negative. Positive thinking will not magically put us in control of our own worlds, let alone the larger world.

Negativity is a natural and healthy response to negative circumstances. There's no need to repress it constantly. Don't deny yourself the response of negativity from time to time! Or, to use the words of this morning's responsive reading, don't forget to cherish your doubts.¹⁸ Sometimes expressing negativity is good for your soul, and sometimes expressing doubts leads to the truth. And beyond the "luck" of life, there will always be injustices in this world. And the appropriate response to injustice is outrage. There's a reason why the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures – and the prophet Jesus in the New Testament – are often saying what could be called negative things. Because negativity – or critique, call it what you will – is the right response in the face of injustice, prejudice, bigotry, and unnecessary suffering. Negativity has an important role for our individual mental health – and for the health of our society. Don't let the pressure to be "bright-sided" let you be "blind-sided" by what's happening all around you. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted." Let's cherish the gift of maladjustment along with our doubts.

What Jesus and the prophets – and, for that matter, Martin Luther King and the Maharaji – had was courage. And as Ehrenreich says, "There is a vast difference between positive thinking and existential courage."¹⁹ My hope for myself and for all of us is that we will think less about "accentuating the positive" and think more about justice, and truth, and, yes, courage. It's not about whether you're the kind of person who sees the glass as being half full or half empty. Because you know what? When the glass is exactly half full, it's exactly half empty, and vice versa. And that's a fact. Why must it be either or? And why are we so obsessed with our own temperaments? The simple fact is, when the glass is half full, it's also half empty, and positive thinking does not magically change this fact. Let's spend our energy making sure we fill the glass as full as we can and give it to those who need to drink from it. That's where our energy should go. I'm more excited about positive actions than positive thinking.

In closing, I keep coming back to some very familiar words. They are well-known to almost all of us, I dare say. They are words written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr²⁰. They are the well known words of the serenity prayer. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference". Beautiful words. A mantra for all of us. Finally, I close with the words of the late Unitarian Universalist minister Forest Church, whom we lost just this last year. During the course of his own struggles with cancer and alcoholism, Church came up with his own mantra or prayer. He wrote, "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are."²¹ Amen, and blessed be.

¹⁸ The responsive reading was "Cherish Your Doubts" by Robert T. Weston, in *Singing the Living Tradition* (UUA, 1993), #650.

¹⁹ Ehrenreich, *ibid*, p. 6.

²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr was one of Norman Vincent Peale's critics, interestingly.

²¹ Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, review of Church's *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=18354v>